



THE Mennonite Quarterly Review

VOLUME XI

JANUARY, 1937

NUMBER ONE

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE THIRD MENNON- ITE WORLD CONFERENCE HELD AT AMSTERDAM, ELSPEET AND WIT- MARSUM, NETHERLANDS, June 29 to July 3, 1936

The 400th anniversary of Menno Simons' conversion and withdrawal from the Catholic Church in 1536 furnished the occasion for the Third Mennonite World Conference, held in Holland from June 29 to July 3, 1936, under the auspices of the Algemeene Doopsgezinde Societeit (General Mennonite Society), the official body of the Mennonite churches of Holland.

The first Mennonite World Conference had a similar occasion, namely, the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Mennonite Church in Switzerland in 1525. It was held at Basel and Zurich, Switzerland, in 1925, although the attendance was rather small. The second Mennonite World Conference, held in Danzig, 1930, had a somewhat different occasion, namely, the problem of bringing relief to the Mennonites of Russia and of providing aid for the refugee colonies which were just then being established in South America. It had a somewhat larger attendance and a fuller program. The third Mennonite World Conference, which followed after a six-year interval, had a larger attendance and a fuller program than either of the two preceding conferences. A rather full report may be of some interest to the readers of the REVIEW.

The 1930 conference in Danzig had asked Dr. Christian Neff of Weierhof, Germany, moderator of the South German Mennonite Conference, to make arrangements for the next conference. He approached the Dutch Mennonites, who agreed to sponsor the conference in connection with the 400th anniversary of the conversion of Menno Simons. A committee on arrangements was appointed by the *Algemeene Doopsgezinde Societeit*, which fixed the time and place of meeting, and worked out the program. The president of the A. D. S., Pastor van Drooge of Deventer, was the chairman of this committee, with Dr. Neff as chief counsellor for the Mennonites from other countries. Van Drooge also served as moderator of the World Conference, with Dr. Neff, who is now almost 75 years of age, as honorary moderator. A young Dutch pastor, Fritz Kuiper of Alkmaar, who may be known to some as one of the two Dutch Mennonite relief workers in Russia at the time of the great famine in 1921 and as son of the widely known and beloved Dr. A. K. Kuiper, formerly senior pastor of the Mennonite Church in Amsterdam, was executive manager of all conference arrangements and had much to do with the success of the conference. Pastor A. A. Sepp, of Zaandam, Secretary of the A. D. S., was official secretary of the conference. He conducted all the official correspondence in arranging the conference, and prepared condensed translations into Dutch and German of all the addresses of the conference.

At first, fears were expressed that the attendance at the conference from foreign countries would be very small, due to the disturbed condition of world affairs and the financial stringency in Germany. However, these fears proved to be ill-founded, for the conference had the largest and most representative attendance of any of the three world conferences held to date. Since the last half of the conference was to be held at the Dutch Mennonite conference grounds at Elspeet in Eastern Holland, where the capacity is limited to 350 guests, it became necessary to limit the attendance of Dutch Mennonites in view of the large attendance from Germany. Each Dutch congregation was allowed but two representatives, except the larger congregations such as the one at Amsterdam. The opening session at the Amsterdam church was attended by a large crowd of about 2,000 which filled the church, while the closing session in Witmarsum was attended by an equally large gathering which took part in the open-air ceremony at the Menno Simons Monument and

joined in the concluding worship service where the crowd was handled by using all four of the churches in the town. The official list of conference-participants, those who registered and paid the small conference fee of \$4.50, was 343. Of this number 170 came from Holland; the remainder were distributed among foreign countries as follows: Germany, 145; Alsace, 8; U. S. A., 7; Canada, 3; Switzerland, 3; Java, 2; Liechtenstein, 2; Paraguay, 1; Poland, 1; China, 1. The representatives from China and Java were missionaries; and the one from Paraguay was a young Mennonite teacher studying in a German university. The two from Liechtenstein were the leader of the Hutterite Bruderhof there, and the widow of the former leader. Those attending from the United States were P. R. Schroeder of Freeman, South Dakota, President of the General Conference of Mennonites of North America; P. C. Hiebert, of Sterling, Kans., of the Mennonite Brethren Church; C. Henry Smith, of Bluffton, Ohio, of the Central Conference; Orie O. Miller, wife and daughter of Akron, Pa., and H. S. Bender of Goshen, Ind., of the (Old) Mennonite Church. Those attending from Canada were David Toews of Rosthern, Saskatchewan, Moderator of the Conference of Mennonites of Canada; C. F. Klassen of Winnipeg, of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference; and a Mr. Hamm of Manitoba.

The conference was entirely unofficial in character, although numerous persons were delegated to attend by their conferences and were asked to bring back a report. No business was transacted by the meeting, although two resolutions were adopted in connection with the first session of the meeting at Elspeet which dealt with relief work. The entire conference was devoted to addresses on various subjects, largely historical, which were intended to make the Mennonites of the various countries acquainted with one another, with their history and present conditions. From this point of view the meeting was particularly valuable to the American visitors at the conference who had a splendid opportunity to become acquainted with conditions among the Mennonites of Europe, as well as to meet personally a very large number of representative Mennonite leaders from Holland, Germany, Switzerland, and Alsace.

Since the conference was in no way official it could not make plans for another world conference in the future. However, the

steering committee of the conference, composed of the four moderators for the various sessions together with a few others, indicated the hope that another similar meeting might be held in connection with some suitable occasion in five or six years, and together with this hope expressed the desire that it might be held in America. A large number of Dutch and other European Mennonite leaders expressed a desire to attend the conference if it should be held in America.

The program of the week's meetings was so planned as to provide for sessions at three different places. The opening service Monday evening, as well as the sessions on Tuesday all day and Wednesday morning, were held in the large meeting-house of the Amsterdam Mennonite Church, called the "Singel Kerk," which is located in the heart of the city. This part of the conference was devoted to a series of survey and historical addresses on the general theme: *The Mennonites in Past and Present* (Die Mennoniten in Geschichte und Gegenwart). The opening session Monday evening was devoted to a worship service, with a sermon by Dr. A. K. Kuiper, former senior pastor of the Amsterdam Mennonite Church, the most widely known Mennonite preacher of Holland. He chose as his text, I Cor. 3:11, Menno Simons' motto, "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." The remainder of the Amsterdam program was as follows: (1) *The Significance of Menno Simons' Work for our Brotherhood*, Pastor N. van der Zijpp, Joure, Holland; (2) *The Mennonites of Holland, Past and Present*, Pastor J. Ijntema, Leeuwarden, Holland; (3) *The Mennonites of Germany, Past and Present*, Dr. Christian Neff, Weierhof, Germany; (4) *The Mennonites of Switzerland and France, Past and Present*, Samuel Geiser, Orange, Tavannes, Switzerland; (5) *The Mennonites of Russia, Past and Present*, Benj. H. Unruh, Karlsruhe, Germany; (6) *The Mennonites of the U. S. A., Past and Present*, H. S. Bender, Goshen, Indiana; (7) *The Mennonites of Canada, Past and Present*, David Toews, Rosthern, Saskatchewan; (8) *The Mennonites of Brazil and Paraguay*. On the last topic brief reports were read which had been sent from the two colonies, and brief oral reports were given by B. H. Unruh and Fritz Kliwer, the latter a student from Paraguay now studying in Germany. On Wednesday evening a lecture was given by Pastor

F. Dijkema of Amsterdam, showing a number of pictures of Mennonite life from various parts of the world.

After the close of the Wednesday morning session in Amsterdam, the entire group was taken on a very interesting trip through the canals and harbor of Amsterdam in ten large motorboats. After this the entire company traveled by chartered steamer across the Zuiderzee to Harderwijk, where they were taken by bus to Elspeet, a conference retreat in the beautiful moor country of eastern Holland not far from Deventer.

The program in Elspeet ran from Wednesday evening until Friday noon as follows: (1) *The Mennonite Church and Her Youth*, Pastor Erich Gottner, Danzig, Germany, and P. R. Schroeder, Freeman, South Dakota; (2) *Mennonite Missions*, Pastor C. Nijdam, Holland, President of the Dutch Mennonite Mission Board, and Orie O. Miller, Akron, Pennsylvania; (3) *Mennonite Relief Work*, Pastor S. H. N. Gorter, Rotterdam, Holland, Chairman of the Dutch Mennonite Relief Committee (Hollandsch Doopsgezind Emigranten Bureau), Bishop David Toews, Rosthern, Saskatchewan, Chairman of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, and P. C. Hiebert, Sterling, Kansas, Chairman of the Mennonite Central Committee; (4) *Sermon*, Jacob Kroeker, Wernigerode, Germany, Director of the Missionary Society, "Licht Dem Osten." Time was given for a very interesting open discussion following each address.

Friday noon the entire company traveled about 100 miles by bus to Witmarsum in East Friesland, stopping on the way for the noon meal at Heeringveen. Witmarsum is historic as the birthplace of Menno Simons, and as the place where he first began to preach the Gospel, also where he experienced the conversion which took him out of the Catholic Church into the ranks of our own brotherhood. The meeting in Witmarsum was therefore in a sense a pilgrimage to a historic shrine of the Mennonite Church. Some years ago a monument was erected on the site of the old Mennonite meetinghouse in the fields near the town of Witmarsum. In the open field around this monument to Menno Simons a large crowd gathered, at least 1,500, most of whom were Frisian Mennonites. The president of the A. D. S., and a representative of the Frisian Mennonite Society, each made short addresses paying tributes to Menno Simons and laying wreaths at the base of the Menno Simons Monu-

ment. Benjamin H. Unruh spoke briefly on behalf of the Mennonites from other lands. A chorus of Frisian Mennonite young people sang a song, their "Bondslied." Immediately after this the entire company proceeded to the town of Witmarsum for the closing service of the conference, which was a worship service with a sermon by Pastor van Drooge. The text used was Lamentations 5:21, "Renew our days as of old." The crowd was so large that it had to be divided among the four churches of the city and the sermon transmitted by loud speaker. The sermon was preached in the Reformed Church, formerly the Catholic Church in Reformation times, probably the church in which Menno Simons preached as a Catholic priest. The service was broadcast over a national network. At the conclusion of this impressive service, brief farewells were spoken by Christian Neff and P. R. Schroeder.

The entire conference was very well organized, and the addresses were very interesting and worth while. The Dutch speakers spoke in Dutch, while all the other addresses were in German. However, each morning mimeographed sheets were handed out containing translations of the addresses in brief, so that those who could not understand one language had a translation of the address in their own language. The addresses in Amsterdam were factual, while those in Elspeet discussed themes of present-day interest. Provision was therefore made for a brief discussion after each of the subjects in Elspeet. The spirit throughout the meetings was splendid. There was a general expression of gratitude for the way in which the entire conference was organized and conducted and the spirit which was manifested throughout. Where occasional differences became evident, as was to be expected, mutual respect was manifested. The larger and more fundamental questions of doctrine and practice on which there are wide divergences among the European Mennonites were not made a part of the program.

One very commendable feature of the conference was the way in which the foreign guests were provided for. During that portion of the conference which was held in Amsterdam the homes of the Amsterdam Mennonites were opened in a very generous way to the guests from a distance. Lodging and breakfast were provided in the homes. Noon and evening meals were provided in a large dining hall at the Central Y. M. C. A. in Amsterdam. In Elspeet all meals and lodging were provided free on the conference grounds in

the very simple but very adequate and comfortable cottages and buildings belonging to the Gemeentedagbewegung (Conference Movement). The sessions of the conference in Elspeet were held in a simple church building on the grounds which seats about 350.

Another special feature of the conference was an interesting exhibit of old books and documents relating to Menno Simons and early Mennonite history. The exhibit was composed entirely of material from the noted library of the Amsterdam Mennonite Church and was on display in the reading room of the library adjoining the church building.

Some may ask the question as to the value of such an international Mennonite gathering. One should not expect too much from such a meeting, but without doubt the limited objectives of the conference were attained; namely, to provide an opportunity for mutual and fruitful contact between the Mennonites of various lands, in the course of which helpful information might be disseminated which would lead to a better understanding of the faith, life and work of various groups; and to emphasize the common historical heritage which has been handed down from our Mennonite forefathers, in this case particularly through Menno Simons. Nothing further was attempted by this Third Mennonite World Conference. No doubt a by-product was at least a partial insight into the sources of weakness and strength in the various groups and some conception of the difficulties which must be overcome before any closer working together is possible. What a marvelous and blessed thing it would be to have a united world Mennonitism, united in faith and practice and work. Such a unity would without doubt strengthen the Mennonite Church everywhere, particularly in the regions where it is at present threatened with decline and decay. Some pessimistic notes were struck along this line at the conference. Those of us who hold to a full-Gospel faith cannot help but be grieved to know that there are sections of world Mennonitism where the simple Bible faith of our forefathers has been abandoned, and also where the principles of peace and nonresistance are no longer cherished. We rejoice at every sign of a spiritual awakening and revival of gospel principles, such as is developing to some extent in Holland today. An encouraging aspect of this third Mennonite World Conference was on the one hand the frank admission by several Dutch speakers that the barren rationalistic liberalism

of the recent past has been unfruitful and cannot meet our spiritual need, and on the other hand the clear and warm evangelical note that was heard in most of the addresses, and the evidence that by far the greatest part of world Mennonitism still desires to hold fast to the simple gospel faith and life that has been our precious heritage as Mennonites these four hundred years, and to press forward in an active propagation of the same. Those who hold this faith will scarcely be willing to compromise or surrender that which is most precious to them as believers for the sake of any superficial union with such as have abandoned this faith, happy as they would be to welcome a restoration of the real unity of the church for which Christ prayed so earnestly in His great high priestly prayer in John 17.

In connection with the World Conference two other meetings were held which were also of considerable importance. One was a meeting of relief committees, and the other a meeting in the interests of our Mennonite peace testimony. A brief report of these two meetings will be in order.

On Monday, June 29, representatives of the various relief committees of Holland, Germany, Canada, the U. S. A., as well as representatives from Switzerland and Alsace, met in Amsterdam, for an exchange of information on the present activities and problems of the various committees, and a consideration of ways and means whereby the work might be strengthened. Pastor S. H. N. Gorter of Rotterdam, chairman of the Dutch Mennonite relief organization, served as chairman of the gathering. Three further meetings were held during the following days. Hitherto the unofficial headquarters for our relief work had been the office of Benj. H. Unruh at Karlsruhe, Germany. It was decided to make this office the official headquarters hereafter with the name *Central Bureau for Mennonite Relief*. Each relief committee will conduct its own work as heretofore, but Professor Unruh will now be able to serve more effectively as the central bureau where information is collected and where various important activities center, such as contact with the German government, the sending of packages to Russia, and assistance to the refugee colonies in Brazil and Paraguay.

On Saturday, July 4, a small group of representatives of various Mennonite peace committees chiefly of Holland and North America, together with several other interested persons, a total of

about twenty-five, met in the quiet retreat grounds of the Dutch Mennonites near Steenwijk in Eastern Holland, known as "Fredeshiem," "house of peace." It was hoped that closer contact between the Mennonites of various lands who still stand for the Biblical principles of peace and nonresistance might contribute to a strengthening of our peace testimony. At this meeting a peace manifesto was endorsed, and steps were taken to organize an International Mennonite Peace Committee whose chief service will be to aid in bringing help to Mennonites who have to suffer for refusal to do military service. It was encouraging to find a unanimous stand by those present on the principle of absolute Gospel nonresistance and peace.

*Resolutions adopted at the Third Mennonite World Conference,
Elspeet, Holland, July 2, 1936*

I

The representatives of the Mennonite Brotherhood from various lands assembled in the Mennonite World Congress at Amsterdam, Elspeet, and Witmarsum, Netherlands, June 29 to July 3, 1936, do adopt the following resolution:

We remember with gratitude the valuable contribution which our Mennonite churches in Russia have made to our Mennonite life and work in the past particularly in the work of foreign missions. We deeply regret the absence of our Russian brethren at this congress and pray the rich blessing of Almighty God upon their congregations. We hope that in view of the changing conditions in the world at the present time it may soon be possible to renew the bond of fellowship which was formerly so close between us and which was made stronger by the relief work at the time of the great famine 1920-1922.

God grant that our Russian brethren may soon resume their place in our Brotherhood and join with us in fulfilling the great tasks which face us at the present time.

In this hope we send our brethren in Russia a hearty greeting of love in Christ Jesus.

II

The Third Mennonite World Conference greets the immigrant brethren in Canada, the United States, Brazil and Paraguay. The Conference thanks God with them that He opened doors for them and prepared organizations which made possible their migration across the ocean and their settlement in the New World.

The Conference thanks all the brethren and sisters who with God's help by faithfulness, industry, and thrift have paid their debts. The heavenly Father will not leave them unrewarded for their faithfulness.

The Conference hopes that economic conditions will improve and therefore appeals urgently to all who have not yet paid their debts, to be fully conscious of the seriousness of their responsibility toward God, toward our brotherhood, toward our past, and last but not least, toward their creditors, and to discharge faithfully their obligations, and to remember that God will help those who endeavor honorably to do their duty.

Other Messages

The following cablegrams were sent by the Conference during the sessions in Amsterdam:

1. To the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, Rosethorn, Sask. "The World Conference sends to the Board, the immigrants and the churches in Canada and the United States, greetings, good wishes, and hearty thanks for all their labors and sacrifice."

2. To Peter Klassen, Witmarsum, Hansa Hammonia, Santa Catharina, Brazil. "The World Conference sends hearty greetings to all colonists, and wishes them further God's help and blessing."

3. To Jacob Siemens, Colonia Fernheim, Chaco, Paraguay. "World Conference thanks you and the Mennonite Central Committee for the great work of colonization and prays God's further help in the conquest of all difficulties."

The following message was sent to Her Majesty, the Queen of the Netherlands. "The General Conference of Mennonites, with representatives present from Europe and America and foreign mission stations, sends to Her Majesty reverential greetings and wishes God's blessings."

As we close this brief report, we are not unmindful of the fact that much more could be said about many interesting aspects and events of the World Conference, but space prohibited a more lengthy report. We are also aware that it might have been possible to spend some time to discuss the points of difference between European and American Mennonites, and to point out what would be necessary for a more solid and permanent approach between our groups on opposite sides of the ocean, but this can better be done in a separate article. In conclusion, we wish to express our thanks for the many kindnesses shown to us on the occasion of our visit in Holland and Germany, especially in connection with the World Conference. It is sometimes said that the Dutch Mennonites are on the whole cold and inhospitable to strangers, but we can testify that this was not the case, for we experienced much real Christian love and Christian hospitality at the hands of our hosts and our friends in Holland in general, which was warm and sincere, and for which we here wish to express our heartfelt thanks. It is our hope and prayer that some seed may have been sown and some good done at this Third Mennonite World Conference which will bear fruit in the coming years to the glory of God and the furtherance of His Kingdom.

Orie O. Miller, Akron, Pennsylvania.
Harold S. Bender, Goshen, Indiana.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.